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Last stand at Dale Farm as police evict residents

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Riot police at Dale Farm (Pic: Guy Smallman)

by Sadie Robinson

There were brutal scenes at Dale Farm in Essex last week as police evicted Travellers from their homes.

Several Travellers were injured during the raid, including one woman whose back was fractured. Authorities cut the site's electricity, despite the fact that several residents relied on breathing machines. Police used Tasers on unarmed protesters at the site.

The brutality of the eviction is a stark signal of the shocking level of racism that Travellers face in Britain today.

Basildon council refused to tell Travellers when the eviction would begin. The first they knew of it was when scores of armed riot police stormed the site early on Wednesday morning.

Terrifying

Mary, one of the Travellers, described the experience as "terrifying". She told Socialist Worker, "My six-year old heard the noise and asked me, 'Are the bailiffs coming to kill us?'

"They said the police would be here to protect us from the bailiffs. But there were no bailiffs in here this morning."

Nora Egan returned from hospital later on Wednesday in a wheelchair with a fractured spine. She told Socialist Worker, "I brought my five-year old child to a caravan on a legal plot this morning because I thought it would be safe.

"A police officer pushed me against a wall. Then he got me on the ground. He kept kicking me and kicking me. Two officers dragged me along the ground, even though I kept saying I was in pain."

Police confirmed to Socialist Worker that a woman had been taken to hospital with "minor back injuries". The police said "nobody has made any formal complaint" about police behaviour.

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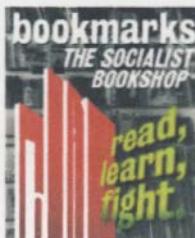
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Paramedics had to bring emergency oxygen to Mary Flynn because she couldn't use her nebuliser. Cornelius, another Traveller, went to hospital after suffering an asthma attack.

Mary Slattery said one officer had pushed her to the ground and held his forearm across her neck. "The police were meant to be here to keep the peace—and they broke it," she said.

All of this was done to remove around 400 Travellers from land they legally own and have lived on for ten years.

Many media commentators talked of violence and brutality during the eviction. But instead of condemning the police, they attacked those who have been camped on the site to support the Travellers.

Police claim that they used Tasers on protesters at Dale Farm because officers were "threatened directly".

Photos show police crouching behind a fence, firing Tasers at the people inside. There is meant to be a ban on police using Tasers as a crowd-control measure.

Dale Farm resident Kathleen McCarthy said, "The council, police and bailiffs have made this place unsafe. If the media and our supporters weren't here, there would be much worse injuries."

At times the police operation was absurd. Scores of heavily armed riot police would march in military formation around the site for no apparent reason.

Time after time they stopped Travellers from moving around on their own land. They also stopped Travellers living on some of the legal plots from leaving their homes. "It's like being in jail," said one of those who found themselves trapped.

Yet the Travellers maintained remarkably good humour. Some marched behind the police, mimicking them and singing, "All coppers are bastards."

But on Thursday there were a lot of tears. Bailiffs pulled down the distinctive scaffold that had marked the main entrance to the site. For many it was an awful sight that meant that they had lost.

Helen has lived at Dale Farm for ten years. She attached children's toys to a fence around one of the plots in a desperate bid to show bailiffs what it is they were destroying.

Dignity

Helen told Socialist Worker, "These are the toys of twin girls, aged one and a half. They used to play here every day."

"There are seven of us sisters here," she went on, in tears. "We've all lived here together. Now we don't know where we're going to wind up."

Travellers marched out of the site defiantly on Thursday evening with their supporters. They feared an increase in violence and didn't want more protesters to be arrested. They wanted to leave on their own terms, with some "dignity and pride" intact.

Dale Farm is divided into a legal and an illegal section, and many Travellers have moved to the legal side. Others have moved their caravans onto the few legal plots scattered around the illegal site.

Still more have nowhere to go. The Dale Farm Travellers may have lost their long-running battle to live on the whole site, but their heroic stand against eviction has been inspiring.

Together with their supporters, the Dale Farm Travellers delayed eviction for ten years. Their resistance slowed down the eviction. They lost because of racism—and they were right to fight it.